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National Interagency Fire Center
3833 S. Development Ave.
Boise, ID 83705

<http://www.nifc.gov>



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Contact: Randy Eardley, 208-387-5895
Rose Davis, 208-387-5437

Hurricanes Create Unique and Hazardous Wildfire Conditions; Alaska Team Aids Mississippi with Wildfire Preparedness in Hurricane's Wake

BOISE, Sept. 28, 2005 – Concerns about increased wildfire hazards may seem out of place in a region where flood damage is so widespread in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. But Mississippi fire officials know they are facing extremely unusual conditions as they enter their fall fire season and have turned to an interagency Incident Management Team, mobilized through the National Interagency Coordination Center in Boise, for assistance in preparedness planning.

Lynn Wilcock's Incident Management Team, based in Alaska, is one of 31 interagency teams from the wildland fire community mobilized to the Gulf Coast for hurricane response. These teams are involved in numerous missions, ranging from operating supply distribution centers, to managing evacuation facilities and camps, to debris cleanup and feeding thousands of workers and evacuees.

Wilcock's team was mobilized in response to Katrina and has been engaged in a variety of other missions prior to taking on the wildfire planning task in conjunction with the Mississippi Department of Forestry.

"We have focused on seven counties in the southeast corner of the state, where the damage and conditions are worst," said John See, spokesman for Wilcock's team. "The salt water infiltration and high winds resulted in standing dead and blown down trees on a carpet of red needles on the forest floor."

See added that the fuel loadings up to 12 miles inland are incredibly high and the potential for rapid rates of spread and severe burn intensities has increased dramatically.

The hazardous fire conditions in the native vegetation are exacerbated by all kinds of debris blown about by the hurricanes, he said.

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“The winds took every bit of building material from many homes and buildings, leaving only concrete slabs. As a result, we have piles and scattered debris of all kinds, including propane tanks and chemical products, all mixed in with the blowdown. It makes for very hazardous fire conditions,” he said.

Normal firefighting tactics used in Mississippi include a heavy reliance on small dozers pulling plows to create fire lines. Given the current conditions, those tactics will no longer work as effectively.

“Working together with the state, we identified a need for aircraft support, additional crews, and heavier equipment,” See said, adding that the team is facilitating ordering all of those elements and setting up a staging area in Wiggins, Mississippi to preposition the incoming resources.

“The resources we’re bringing in will be pre-positioned in Wiggins for 45 days, which should carry through the primary fall fire season,” he said.

The 31 Incident Management Teams mobilized throughout the Southeast for hurricane response are comprised of specialists from the U.S.D.A. Forest Service; the Department of the Interior agencies, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; along with state and local fire program specialists.

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